

## Watch -chapter 1-

He was definitely not good at waking up in the mornings, yet, Matsuoka found himself opening his eyes before his alarm clock went off. He washed his face, brushed his teeth, and groomed his facial hair. He ran the blade across his skin with even more caution than usual so he wouldn't nick himself.

After a simple breakfast of bought bread and coffee, he opened his closet. As a man in the sales occupation, his suit was his battle gear, and was an absolute necessity. As such, he had more in number than the average worker who worked solely within the company.

He already had a liking for clothes, anyway, so he also had more suits than he needed. Matsuoka folded his arms in front of the wide array of clothes before him.

Today, he was scheduled to visit Ishibashi Products in the afternoon. The person in charge of that company was older than him and had a keen eye. If Matsuoka dressed himself to the nines, the man would see him as a show-off. It was best to keep it a little on the imperfect, slightly unfashionable side.

On the other hand, if his contact was someone who couldn't tell the difference between ready-to-wear and bespoke, Matsuoka could pull all the stops if he wanted to.

Today, he felt like wearing a nice suit—but then, there was Ishibashi Products. Perhaps he could compromise by picking a good-quality article with subdued colours, he thought, but he still wasn't quite sure. He didn't like dark, heavy colours much. He felt like dressing up in something bright and snappy.

At the very least, he wanted to look good enough so that at first glance, even a man who knew nothing about the quality and price of clothing would be impressed.

Tonight, Matsuoka and Hirosue had plans for dinner together. Hirosue had invited him first.

They had resumed e-mailing and calling each other after the incident at the railway crossing when the man had told him he might love him. This was their first time seeing each other face-to-face to share a meal after the incident.

They had eaten together a few times when Matsuoka had still been crossdressed. However, as Yosuke Matsuoka, this was only his second time. He didn't want to mess things up.

It was only a dinner, after all; there wasn't much to succeed or fail at, he admitted, but he did want to make it so that Hirosue enjoyed himself and would be encouraged to eat with him again.

Time ticked by steadily while Matsuoka tried to decide on this suit or that suit, and today's work. In the end, he threw his concerns about Ishibashi Products out the window and picked his favourite suit and a tie he thought looked good with it.

At work, he always wore a practical watch, but today he felt like being a little creative and wearing a nice one. Matsuoka pulled the drawer of his side table—apparently with a little too much enthusiasm, for he ended up pulling the whole drawer out and dropping it on the floor. His watches tumbled out of their watch cases and scattered across the floor.

"Oh, geez..."

He knelt down to pick them up. Amongst his collection of favourite watches, there was one that didn't quite fit. It had a well-worn brown band with a gold rim and a scratched face.

Hirosue's watch. He had taken it home when they went camping and had made it his. *I should return it*, he thought. *But what am I supposed to say after all this time?* He didn't want to make a lame excuse—the man would see right through it and would think he'd stolen it.

The watch in his hand weighed down on his conscience. —*I know. The car. I'll tell him I was cleaning the car and I found it. That way, it wouldn't be unnatural.*

Matsuoka put Hiro sue's watch in his pocket and slipped his favourite watch on his wrist. His heart stopped when he saw the time. He had to leave his house soon, or else he'd be late.

Matsuoka tore through the streets so fast, he turned heads. He finally arrived at the station. He checked his watch and saw that it was five minutes before their promised meeting time, and Hiro sue was not here yet. Once he came to a stop, a rush of sweat poured from his forehead and armpits. The meeting with Ishibashi Products had gone on longer than expected, and Matsuoka had been nervous about being late for their dinner.

This was on top of the whole day he had spent working—*I didn't want him to see me sweaty like this*, Matsuoka thought, looking down.

"Um—" a voice suddenly said.

Matsuoka snapped his head up to see Hiro sue in front of him, with his unfashionably navy suit, cream-coloured cotton coat, and a bushy mop of hair that looked like it was made for winter.

Matsuoka hastily straightened up.

"It's been a while," he said, then remembered they had talked on the phone just yesterday. "—since we saw each other in person," he added lamely.

They had talked on the phone several times, about work, or if not, about the day's news, or celebrities—harmless topics. Matsuoka was still too afraid to ask the man questions that cut to the quick of the situation.

"Where would you like to go?" Hiro sue asked.

"Doesn't matter to me."

Hiro sue tilted his head and wore a troubled expression. Although he had been the one to extend the invitation, it seemed he had not picked a specific place to go.

"Is it alright if it's somewhere close?"

"Sure."

Matsuoka didn't care if he was taken to a dirty *izakaya* or some franchise family restaurant.

Hiro sue broke into a slow walk. Matsuoka wondered where he should place himself, and mustered the courage to walk right beside him, though he still felt a little unsure.

They were just walking together, yet he felt unbearably thirsty. It wasn't because he had sweated; it was because he was nervous.

The silence was getting awkward and he wanted to say something, but he couldn't think of anything convenient to say.

"You were really rushing, weren't you?" Hiro sue said softly. Matsuoka turned to him. "I was walking along when I saw this person go running past me like a bullet. I realized it was you, so I called your name, but..."

He hadn't realized at all. So the man had seen him running desperately so he wouldn't be late. Sweat ran off his back from the embarrassment at the thought.

"Uh, well—" Matsuoka wiped the sweat off his brow with his palm. "I always set my watch a little bit ahead. I totally forgot about it, and I thought I was late... which was why..."

"Oh. I see." Hirose's response didn't seem to carry any further meaning. The simple man had apparently believed his haphazard excuse. *Now*, Matsuoka thought. *This is the right time to give it back.*

'Oh, speaking of watches, I heard from Hayama that you lost your watch, Mr. Hirose. Could it be this, by any chance? I was cleaning my car and I found it wedged between the seats.' After mentally simulating the conversation, Matsuoka reached into his jacket pocket. He could feel Hirose's watch there.

"Something the matter?"

He had unwittingly stopped in his tracks. Matsuoka hastily caught up to Hirose, who was a little ahead of him.

"Nothing." He let his fingers slip away from the sensation of Hirose's watch and pulled his hand out of his pocket.

In the end, Matsuoka ended up taking home the watch that he had meant to give back. He had a number of chances to bring the topic up, but he couldn't bring himself to.

He sat down on the sofa and let himself sink down into a slump. Through the haze of his slight drunkenness, he could smell the oily scent of grilled meat on himself.

Hirose had taken him to a tabletop barbecue restaurant. The meal was delicious, but now his favourite suit was flecked with grease, and his tie was also soaked with the smell of meat. He definitely had to take them to the dry cleaner's, pronto.

He wondered why it had been a barbecue restaurant when they usually went to *izakaya*. Finally, he realized that perhaps meat was something "higher-class"<sup>1</sup> for Hirose, and that his choice of restaurant had been out of consideration for Matsuoka. In fact, to prove it, Hirose had not let Matsuoka pay for his portion for dinner, even though he had offered to split the bill. The man had treated him.

To be completely honest, he had harboured a small expectation for the man to say something. But the fact that they were dining at a loud, informal barbecue restaurant already made things dubious. Just as he expected, their dinner ended without them discussing any romantic topics.

*I can't let myself get impatient*, Matsuoka told himself. *I won't rush him for an answer*. The man had finally come around to him. He didn't want to take a misstep and end up boring the man or scaring him away.

They had taken such a long detour, it was enough to make Matsuoka jittery. If told to wait, he was willing to wait for as long it took—but how long would that be?

Something fell with a clunk. The watch was on the floor. Matsuoka hastily scooped it up.

It was the watch he had meant to return—Hirose's watch. It was practical, but not much else; it was old, scuffed, and unfashionable. Certainly not a man that he could expect to act like he wanted.

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1 Tabletop, or "do-it-yourself" barbecue (*yakiniku*) restaurants usually serve beef (which is generally expensive in Japan), and the grade and cut of the meat is usually more expensive than those used for regular cooking.

But Matsuoka still loved him—he loved him, and there was nothing he could do about that.

Matsuoka closed his right hand around the watch. Over and over, he recalled their time together in his mind. The smell of grilling meat, the burnt vegetables, and the man's fingers around his beer glass. He had felt happy but impatient, anxious but happy—the emotions in his memory were vague and nebulous.

But there was one thing he knew: even after he had come home with his favourite suit splattered with grease from the grill, he was giddy, and he found it hard to calm down at all.